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President's secrecy order is unnecessary and unwise

RONALD REAGAN is hardly the first president to bemoan the fact that "confidential" information tends to leak through his administration's fingers like vanilla ice cream at the beach in July. But like his predecessors, he's the one who bit the end off the cone. What does he expect?

When an administration leaks information to the media for its own purposes, its example understandably encourages others to do the same. That's not necessarily bad: our government would run a lot less smoothly if officials couldn't float trial balloons or criticize an agency's policies without being publicly identified by name. But where do you draw the line?

President Nixon, when he activated the "plumbers" to search for leakers in his administration, said he was drawing the line at national security. But "national security," in the Nixon dictionary, meant anything threatening his re-election.

Now it's President Reagan's turn. Just two months after angrily announcing that he'd "had it up to my keister with these leaks" and ordering tighter controls on press contacts with White House staffers, he's going after the potentially more serious leakage of classified information. But his prescription is a case of blatant overkill, a capitulation to the sort of police-state mentality that was such a characteristic of the Nixon administration.

Mr. Reagan has ordered that any federal employee with access to classified information must agree in advance to submit any writings for government review, and to submit to a lie-detector examination if asked to do so by agents investigating a leak of such information. This extends CIA practices to the State Department, White House, Justice Department and other agencies. It will intimidate a lot of people. But it won't work, as Kentucky's Senator Huddleston implied this week, because it's a double standard.

Senator Huddleston, a member of the Senate's Select Committee on Intelligence, notes that information presented only days earlier to the committee as classified was turned over to the world by the Reagan administration when it published 300,000 copies of a Defense Intelligence Agency report on Soviet military power. The report was released, of course, to bolster President Reagan's attempts to head off congressional cuts in defense spending.

"Selective declassification," as Mr. Huddleston called it, tends to make cynics of those who deal with classified data. When today's secret can become tomorrow's headline as a result of political expedience, it cheapens the value of secrecy and challenges the credibility of the whole system.

The same point is emphasized by the President's order that the writings of everyone with access to ultra-secret documents be washed through a pre-publication screening. Theoretically, at least, that would apply not only to memoirs by former officials but magazine articles, novels and letters to the editor. Yet in practice, as everyone knows, all outgoing presidents, secretaries of state and other high officials now pepper their memoirs with selected revelations cleared by no one but themselves. It's a double standard that's unlikely to be changed, and thus it's guaranteed to fail.

As for threatening all employees with lie detector tests, that's simply government by intimidation. The tests are of such questionable accuracy that they're not even accepted in court. But security-fetishists love these machines for the fear they invoke. When even the innocent tremble at the thought of interrogation, as totalitarian regimes since the Spanish Inquisition have proved, then life becomes simpler for those in charge.

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